DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 472 CS 216 549

AUTHOR Fullmer, Shawn E.
TITLE The Good Teacher: Stories of Learning.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Ethnography; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Teacher Competencies; Teacher Education; Teacher Role; *Teaching Assistants; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Styles

ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined three new teaching assistants (TAs) from July 1995 to July 1996 at a state university. Data included observing their classrooms, gathering artifacts, and talking about their experiences to determine what types of training and experiences lead to a successful TA and what elements or characteristics comprise a successful TA. Subjects each taught an English 101 class in the fall quarter 1995, used the same textbook, and developed similar syllabi. Results indicated that the teacher's authoritative status in relation to his or her students, and the teacher's organization of the classroom lesson plans, especially in terms of time management, are important issues. Findings suggest that each teacher should explore the spectrum of pedagogical stances, eventually donning the most natural and comfortable. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 425 472

The Good Teacher: Stories of Learning.

by Shawn E. Fullmer

Published:

1998-04

CS 216549

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Fullmer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

THE GOOD TEACHER: STORIES OF LEARNING

Every year Writing Program Directors in college English departments throughout the nation conduct an initiation, leading hundreds of teaching assistants through a rite of passage from student to teacher. In 1981 the Modern Language Association, realizing the enormity of this field, called for research into improving TA training programs. However, little research has been done on the teaching of new TAs.

Seeking to illuminate this gap, I conducted an ethnographic study of three new TAs (Mary, John, and Jane) from July 1995 to July 1996 at a state university. While observing their classrooms, gathering artifacts, and talking about their experiences, I asked: What types of training and experiences lead to a successful TA? And what elements or characteristics comprise a successful TA? Two possible answers emerged--the TAs' authoritative status in relation to their students and organization of classroom lesson plans.

Mary and Jane were highly successful instructors, promoted to teaching higher level writing courses. John, however, struggled with his role as a TA and was asked to quit teaching. Success seemed to hinge upon the TA's stance of co-learner or disseminator of knowledge *and* flexibility in classroom time management. Paradoxically, the harder John attempted to emulate "traditional" pedagogical methods, the more his students resisted learning and developed negative and counterproductive underlife activities. Before I begin Mary, John, and Jane's stories of learning, I'd like to provide some background information. Neither Mary, nor John, nor Jane had taught at the university level before. Each of them participated in a week long teacher preparation workshop before fall quarter began. In addition to the workshop, each of them enrolled in a teaching practicum seminar for that fall quarter. And lastly, each of them taught an English 101 class fall quarter 1995, used the same textbook, and developed similar syllabi.

CS216549

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

MARY'S STORY

Let me start with a quote that embodies Mary's pedagogical philosophy. In her notebook Mary wrote:

> A good teacher should be able to interpret the timbre of the classroom and adjust lesson plans according to the needs of the students. In the same way that sometimes a character drives a plot in a new direction, a student, or a question, or a recalcitrant computer can change a teacher's focus. The teacher has to have the openness to be aware of classroom dynamics, and the flexibility to cope with necessary modifications to the lesson plan.

A nontraditional student, Mary returned to college in 1993, receiving her BA degree in English from a state university in 1995. As an undergraduate, Mary received the Outstanding Senior of the Year Award in the Department of English. Prior to returning to college, Mary had taught choir and music extensively, for 20 years, on the elementary level.

Fall quarter Mary taught in a computer classroom. These computers were arranged in pods of four, with each of the 20 students sitting at a computer. The room felt informal and relaxed with healthy, green plants and colorful mobiles of tropical fish hanging from the ceiling. An aquarium, filled with guppies and bright blue rocks , gurgled against one wall.

Mary's casualness with, caring, and concern for students showed in both my observations and her English 101 student evaluations. One student wrote: "[Mary] is a wonderful teacher because she seems to care about each student individually. She wanted to know how we were doing and made sure everything was okay. I really liked that she is so caring."

Mary received above average student evaluations fall quarter. Mary received 5.2 out of a possible 6.0 on both the overall quality of the course and instructor effectiveness categories. These above average student evaluations, coupled with Mary's course work performance led to teaching another English 101 class and an English 200 persuasive writing class winter quarter. Mary was also highly successful as an instructor in these courses.

Mary and I met for the final time on April 2, 1996. We both sipped coffee and chatted briefly about our personal lives before we began the interview. I asked Mary what her advice to new teachers would be. She remained quite for about ten seconds, scrunched her bottom lip, rolled her eyes upward, then said:

> I don't know right off the top of my head, that's a real tough one. It's kind of like a freewrite I gave my students today where I said, "what one significant event or person or something like that changed your life?" The obvious one is not to stress out but that's impossible. I think the biggest piece of advice isn't something not to do but something I did--and that's to know your students. And I work very hard to do that. Even if it's not personal as long as I know their names. There's just something there, they trust me. I guess the other thing would be to come to class early. I hand back papers before class and I'm talking to them. I'm still struggling with being the good guy though. I write all these encouraging things and then I have to give them a grade. I'm still struggling with it and it's just so hard because it seems like there's a feeling of betrayal.

The final question I asked Mary was what her plans for the future included. She shifted towards me, responding immediately in an excited tone:

> I'm really delighted that I've been recommended to teach English 302 [beginning fiction writing] next year. From the outset that's really what I wanted to teach. It's interesting, when all the publishers came, that's what I kept grabbing, and I never dreamed I'd teach it, and I still don't know if I'll be able to. It's only because the professor is going on sabbatical. The English 301 classes are similar and so I'd like to do that also.

Mary then eased back in her chair, her tone shifted down an octave, and she said in a hushed tone:

> I'll tell you though Shawn, I don't know. When I first started, applied for this, it was with the thought of getting my master's and then maybe an adjunct position. But it's sucking me dry, my creativity, and maybe when I'm not in school it won't, you know,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> maybe when I'm not trying to teach, and so, to continue, after I get my master's maybe it won't be quite so bad. I really don't want to get a Ph.D. at this point. Because my creativity is going into my students and it's going into meeting with students, and that's just really drowning me and each time I'm leaning forward and trying to remain engaged but I find my creativity going off this way and so I'm just going to have to see how next year goes. The only reason I'm going to school is because of my husband, he works here. If he didn't, I'd still be playing the piano.

JOHN'S STORY

> In a questionnaire from August 1995, John explained his pedagogical perspective:
>
> I have a different attitude about English than many teachers I have known. I know what it is like to be inhibited in academic writing, and I know what it is like to fight disinterest and find something (no matter how small) to maintain the interest necessary to get the job of writing done . . . I mean to point out that I had the bone-head English courses in high-school and have a desire to help people who have hated English in the past realize that it can be fun and interesting if they find a reason to write without threat of a bad grade.

John began the MA program after receiving a BA in English, with a minor in philosophy, from a large state university in 1995. John had no formal teaching experience, although he pointed out that he tutored English for one year and "taught classes in church." While an instructor, John said, "I expect to learn how to gain confidence, to learn how to gain the students' confidence, and how to teach effectively. I expect to gain the experience that will help me get a good teaching job."

I first visited John's class on October 18, 1995. John taught in a intimate and cozy classroom with large windows overlooking the university's quad. As I entered John's classroom, I immediately observed a unique teaching device that John employed, one which seemed insignificant at the time but would later develop into a central concern among his students and departmental faculty. John was "sitting on the edge of the table at the front of the classroom,

intently studying crib notes, head down turned." John wrote these notes on 3X5 cards and used them to organize his daily lesson plans and activities. He cupped them in his hand throughout the class period and referred to them quite often.

From the student evaluations comes this comment to the question: "What aspects of teaching or content of the course do you feel were especially good?" "None. It was all too basic. Stuff students should have had as a junior in high school. The instructor always seemed too timid to teach. He was at a total loss if he didn't have his 3X5 card to show him what to do next." While John used the 3X5 cards all of fall quarter, he abandoned them winter quarter after the Director of Writing said they were causing a problem. Once John was aware of the trouble, he quickly perceived that the cards gave his students the impression of weak teaching skills, a lack of class preparation, and an aura of overall unassuredness.

John's student evaluations reflected the tension within his classroom and the underlying sense of hostility and resentment harbored by many of his students. While the quantitative data from the student evaluations clearly pointed to John's weakness as a teacher (he received a 2.9 out of 6.0 on the overall quality of the course category and a 2.6 out of 6.0 on the instructor effectiveness category), the qualitative student comments gave a clearer indication of the specific problems. One student commented: "The teaching was not very good. I could see he was trying but he is not very good at communicating. He needs to get the class to participate more. He tries very hard but he needs a lot more work."

John was asked to teach one English 101 class winter quarter. In an effort to improve his teaching abilities, the Director of Writing drafted a contract tailored to provide him with theoretical readings, teacher modeling, self-analysis, and a clearer understanding of the purposes underlying each assignment. Having read and written analyses of the readings over Christmas break, John's teaching did improve. John's winter quarter student evaluations reflected this. One student commented: "The teaching got better as time went on. He seemed to get used to us as we did to him. I have learned a lot about writing papers from this class." However, as the following

comment shows, John still had some weaknesses as a teacher: "Sometimes the teacher didn't seem confident in his teaching. By that I mean that he sometimes seemed uncomfortable in class. Also, some of the exercises we did in class didn't really seem relevant to the assignments we did out of class. I'm not sure how effective he will be as a teacher." The question of whether or not John was effective as a teacher was answered by the English Department faculty spring quarter--John's teaching contract was not renewed.

I met with John for the last time on March 27, 1996. We sat down and talked for a few minutes about our weekend. Then I asked John, "For a new teacher coming in, what would your advice be?"

> I would say plan the whole quarter out in advance, I mean look at the outline. They wouldn't have to have every lesson plan but have an idea of where each assignment is going. Have your plans done well in advance so you have time to modify them. Another thing that would help is having the opportunity to observe other teachers . . . I think I really needed imitation. I did some of my own original things but I also blatantly stole assignments and activities. If it works, what's wrong with it? The purpose is to teach.

Finally, I asked John what his plans for the future were.

> Particularly now (now that I'm not teaching this quarter, I'm subbing and I'm doing that so I can show, hopefully, that I do have teaching skills) I'd like to be an assistant for a professor's poetry class and if I can get that kind of experience, maybe they'll let me teach again. But I do want to edit for the English Department's yearly magazine. It's also been mentioned that I might replace the editor next year because he's leaving. They want to steer me to where my talents are, they say. I'm amazed that they can perceive those talents in me. But I have done editing before and I'm honored that they would want me to do that. Just as long as they're not doing that . . . because they think they need to give me a consolation prize for not teaching.

Then John sat up straight and said:

> I plan on doing my creative thesis next year and graduating and then maybe going on for my Ph.D., if by then I don't know what I want to do. I'm almost afraid I'm in the wrong field altogether, sometimes, because I have some other abilities in counseling. But it's scary to think I'm in the wrong field. But if I could teach, I would like to leave that option open.

JANE'S STORY

In her journal, on October 23, 1995, Jane wrote a passage that illustrates her attitude toward teaching:

> Being a little bit sick, I just decided to take this class period easy. I tell you, that turned out to be the wisest teaching move I've taken so far. I didn't have all these activities completely scheduled but instead had some ideas of what to do but made the final decision as class was moving along. It was great. Things seemed a lot more relaxed, the students were happy and participating, and I was happy that they were happy. What a contrast to last time. I think I'm going to operate more toward this style--it's the way I operate normally anyway and I believe that'll make a big difference in class.

For Jane, a master's degree was a natural progression towards her ultimate goal of becoming an English professor. Jane, who earned a BS degree from a state university in 1993, had no formal teaching experience, but had "taught groups at church meetings and individuals during a year and a half mission in Bulgaria [for her church]." Jane expectations as a teacher included "a splendid experience of learning how to teach and teaching people from whom I learn."

I first observed Jane's classroom on October 18, 1995. Jane taught in a large, stereotypical 1950s classroom, complete with tan linoleum flooring and a silver radiator, which clanked incessantly, along one wall. Because the classroom was so large and antiseptic, in addition to the class being taught at 7:30 a.m., the students seemed especially passive. Jane seemed to sense the heightened potential for boredom and compensated with added verve and personal attention for each student. One student commented: "I feel that Jane was an exceptional

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

instructor. She worked hard for our class and she even gave us treats. She showed that she cared about our writing and helping us get better at it. She will make a very good teacher someday." Even though Jane's student evaluations were for the most part positive, she did have some apprehensions. Jane commented about this in her journal on November 17, 1995.

> I'm a little nervous. Not only did I pass out some essays which I graded harder than usual, but I passed out (no--I didn't faint) teacher evaluations today. Eek. I'm mainly worried that they'd be upset about their grades but only one student came and talked to me about it and he didn't really seem worried . . . I dreamt all last night about my students. Actually, it was the next quarter and I was put in this HUGE room with thousands of students and they were all being rude and, when I tried to pass out evaluations, half of them walked out so I screamed at them and they mumbled some derogatory remarks under their breath and it was just horrible and all I could think was, " I wish I had my students from last quarter back."

Jane's nightmare about hostile students and her apprehension about poor student evaluations were ephemeral. The quantitative data from the fall quarter student evaluations placed her well above average, with a 5.6 out of 6.0 on both the overall quality of the course score and the instructor effectiveness score. Jane's encouraging student evaluations and observations by a teaching assistant led to teaching another English 101 class and an English 200 persuasive writing class winter quarter.

Jane and I met for our final meeting, on March 27, 1996. We talked about our plans for the upcoming summer and how nice it would be to have a break. I asked Jane what her advice to a new teacher might be. She said:

> I wasn't really worried about it (teaching). I'm not the type of person that gets really nervous and stressed out about things, until I went to that workshop. Because we started talking about authority figure stuff and I'd never thought about it before. I thought, "I guess I can't just get up there and teach and do what I thought I'd do." So I started with

> the idea that I'd have to follow these guidelines. Like a teacher was talking about the baseball scenario. Here I am holding the bat and I have to stand a certain way and that is more detrimental to me than getting up there and swinging it, which I should have done in the first place. But my advice would be use your own personal style and do what feels good to you and then maybe try and apply some of those things talked about in the summer workshop, rather than having all those rules and trying to follow those rules and then trying to put in your own personal style.

In closing our interview, I asked Jane what her plans for the future included. She sat up and immediately said:

> I am totally excited to go and get my Ph.D. and become a teacher. That's exactly what I want to do. I'll be teaching a 200-level class during summer quarter . . . I know for sure that what I want to do is teach at a university but had I not had this teaching experience, I don't know if I would have realized that.

CONCLUSION

Mary, John, and Jane's stories of learning illustrate some of the hallmarks of a good teacher. As we reflected upon their experiences and stories for themes and patterns, two emerged: the teacher's authoritative status in relation to their students and the teacher's organization of the classroom lesson plans, especially in terms of time management. By inverting each of these themes into a series of questions, then applying each question to Mary, John, and Jane's stories, important issues are raised for discussion. The themes, in turn, become the following questions: What stance should new teachers adopt in terms of status in their classrooms? Should new teachers present themselves as authority figures, judges, coaches, peers, or co-learners? And how rigid or flexible should new teachers be in syllabus and lesson planning and in classroom time management? The first questions have no definite answers. Each teacher should explore the spectrum of pedagogical stances, eventually donning the most natural and comfortable. For some, like Jane, this stance might manifest itself suddenly. For others, like

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

John, the struggle for that identity might never occur. Some teachers, like Mary, might struggle between the role of coach and judge, or, like Jane, might start as collaborative conspirators in learning, eventually shifting to a more traditional, authoritative stance. Sometimes, like John, the overwhelming responsibility of being in control of students might blur the true potential for teaching. Like the previous example, the second question cannot be dissected into right or wrong answers. A continuum of possibilities exists, and it is up to each teacher to find an individual comfort zone. Mary was highly organized in her class outlines yet capable of flexibility based on her students' needs in actual classroom operations. John carried classroom organization to an even greater degree, adhering adamantly to the agenda scrawled on his 3X5 cards. In stark contrast to Mary and John, Jane viewed a rigid class structure as an obstacle to teaching. She progressively adopted a more spontaneous and flexible teaching style.

Mary, John, and Jane's stories can enable writing program directors and educators to understand the needs of new teachers. Hopefully, this will, in turn, promote the theories and methods of teaching used by teacher training programs--and, ultimately, contribute to the good teacher.